



Yulia Drunina

АЛГО



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ALICE

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This happened in the autumn of 1944 in Estonia, during the war of the Soviet Union against nazi Germany.

As a field nurse of a regiment of self-propelled guns, I had travelled with the advancing troops. The medical car had got stuck far behind somewhere, I had no communication with it, and my

stock of bandages was dwindling with alarming rapidity — there are always many wounded during an offensive.

And then one day an old woman approached me at a farmstead we had just taken. She was lovingly holding a madly cackling dirty-white hen in her hands.

She knew no Russian, but she made herself clear enough: her hen had a broken leg—obviously the result of the bombardment.

I did not think the old woman was making an unreasonable request asking me to help the fowl. I don't belong to the category of people who think that feeling pain is the privilege of humans.

But what would my comrades say?

I tried to explain to the old woman that I was short of bandages, but she just kept pushing the hen into my hands.

There had formed a circle of curious soldiers around us. Suddenly I heard the reproving voice of a middle-aged soldier:

"That's a living creature in pain! Have you no heart, lass?"

Another, younger man supported him: "All those city folk are alike. No understanding."

Then came a chorus of condemnation. The things they said about my heartlessness! I don't like thinking of it even now.

True, one joker suggested that the "wounded" chicken would make a very nice broth, but they turned on him so fiercely that he shut his mouth in a hurry and just blinked.

I opened my bag. Somebody planed two chips of wood for me, and I applied splints to the hen's leg in full accordance with the medical science.

I was thus given an object lesson of kindness by front-line soldiers who, it would seem, should have been purged of all sentimentality by the war.

That lesson was to be remembered by me always, and I remember it now, as I am writing about Alice. I remember that unimaginably distant war autumn and myself, an awkward girl with a Red Cross bag over my shoulder and a cackling hen in my hands.



One day my fifteen-year-old daughter told me about a dog who had been "trying to sell itself".

Alyona had met that odd creature at what is known as the Bird Market in Moscow, which she visited every Sunday. They sell not only birds but all kinds of pets there—fish, guinea pigs, dogs...



The dog-sellers were lined along a tall stone fence. Unnerved by the unusual atmosphere and a presentiment of betrayal, the dogs barked at every passer-by. Actually, the owners surreptitiously urged them on, in the way the Gypsies, we are told, used to tease the horses to make them look frisky. After all, people mostly bought dogs to guard their houses, so the more vicious the dog the higher the price.

A terribly skinny and unkempt Alsatian was sitting by the fence silently, all alone, watching enviously every dog who left with a new master. Its mournful eyes and shyly wagging tail, its entire tense pose seemed to say, nay, to cry: "Please, take me too, please!"

But no one was interested in a bit of goods that had no price on it. A dog that was selling itself, or rather giving itself away, was something strange and even suspicious. To be sure it looked like an Alsatian, but one could just imagine its pedigree!

For three Sundays running Alyona saw that dog at the market, always in the same place. Each time its eyes looked more hopeless, and its bones stuck out more noticeably underneath its skin.

After hearing this story, we decided to adopt that dog irrespective of its pedigree—even if it was a mongrel of pure blood.

So the next Sunday found us threading our way through a throng of people and animals. There was an undescrivable babel of voices, barks and twittering. I was dazed.

Suddenly, among the hoarse dogs tugging at their leashes I saw,

squatting on the snow, a strange animal, which looked scared out of its wits. It was the size of a cat, its coat was sand-coloured, it had huge bright-yellow eyes, a taut body, a luxuriously fluffy tail and thin legs, the hind ones knock-kneed in the shape of the letter "X".

There was a home-made collar on the animal's neck. Attached to it was a chain held by a frightened-looking boy, who had probably been kicked out of the house with firm orders to get rid of the unwanted pet.

I squatted beside the animal and stroked it cautiously. It flattened its ears.

"Careful, it bites!" the boy cried. But I was already holding the animal in my arms. Its heart was beating wildly, and its entire body was shuddering convulsively. Small wonder! Imagine such scary surroundings for a wild animal!

Actually I did not think of it as a "wild animal"—it was too miserable and frightened. Besides, I thought it was a cub. Only later we discovered that it was a young but fully-grown steppe fox, a *corsak*.

The Encyclopedia says about them: "The *corsak* looks like an ordinary fox, but it is smaller (length of body—50-60 cm, tail—25-35 cm). It lives in deserts and semi-deserts of Asia and South-Eastern Europe. In the Soviet Union it is to be found from Northern Caucasus to Transbaikalia, and as far north as 50° N. *Corsaks* are useful in exterminating rodents."

In gratitude for this useful function mankind has been ruthlessly exterminating these *corsaks*, since, as the Encyclopedia explained, they "yield excellent pelts".

Well, here I was holding my very own *corsak*, while the frightened boy was pocketing a tenner (not a high price!).

I was clearly aware of the complications that awaited me. And I do not mean just the organisational difficulties that invariably arise and multiply when you bring a creature from the wild world into your own, civilized one, unless you intend to keep it imprisoned,





that is confined to a cage. Nor do I only meant that poignant feeling of personal responsibility, dogging you day and night. "You are responsible for those you have befriended..."

The worst thing is that our relationships with our wild animals almost always end tragically. The wild world takes vengeance on those who violate its laws.

I meant to ask the boy what he called the animal, where it had come from and what food it took—for I could not possibly provide it with a diet of rodents. Just then, however, Alyona descended on me like a whirlwind accompanied by the very dog for whose sake we had come to the market and which, strangely enough, really was an Alsatian. He had a meek, forlorn look. Now that he had finally found a "buyer", he followed my daughter as if he were glued to her heels. On the spot we named him Docile, Dossy for short, and the fox we named Alice.

In the meantime Alice's former owner had vanished.

So we never found out how she came to be in Moscow. One fancied she had come on her long slender legs from some unknown lands, from the half-forgotten tales of childhood.

I walked through the throng, clasping the trembling Alice, and everybody stared at us, while some pest of a little girl ran after me asking again and again: "Why did you buy it, madam? For a fur collar?"



Alyona pushed a chicken leg under the sideboard: though we did not yet know Alice's tastes, we were sure she was not a vegetarian.

Soon we heard the crunching of bones. My daughter peered under the sideboard—the crunching changed to cough-like sounds. We became frightened that Alice had choked on a bone, but soon we learnt that a cough is a *corsak's* way of expressing anger of medium intensity.

Alice demonstrated another way of voicing her resentment when Pussy came into the room—ruffled up and puzzled. The smell of a wild animal had set her on edge.

Alice rushed out from under the sideboard and started yapping in a high puppy's voice. This, we learnt, expressed the superlative degree of anger.

Pussy retaliated by arching her back like a camel. I picked her up and carried her out of the room, wrathful and spitting furiously.

Alice gave the same kind of reception to Dossy when he was brought in for a formal introduction. On the way from the market they were both so worked up that they took no notice of each other. But here, in the house, having been given complete freedom of movement and having investigated its geography, Alice felt it was her territory. The inoffensive Dossy stared wonderingly at the small cheeky creature yapping frenziedly at him. He could have knocked her off her feet with one paw. So the introduction was not a success. The dog had to be taken away too.

Having frustrated the designs of her enemies, the "conqueror" began sniffing at the furniture, at every chair, every table leg. Then she jumped on an armchair that stood by the window, propped herself on the sill and stared out with great interest into the snow-bound Moscow courtyard. She repeated this manoeuvre innumerable times in the days that followed. Beyond the window was freedom.

I poured some meat soup into a ceramic ashtray and offered it to Alice. She sniffed at it and then expressed her disdain with extreme clarity by squatting over it and sending a jet of pee straight into the bowl. We were shocked. Imagine such table manners!

Later I found out that foxes had this way of marking their stores. But then, they first buried them in the ground. Here

Alice did quite well without any earth to cover up her food. It was an instinct with her.

On the other hand, I suspect that she also did it out of her amazing sense of humour. She often repeated this "chamber pot" trick, but only when she did not like the food.

When night fell, Alice became quite lively. She dashed about the room like a squirrel, jumping on chairs and down on the floor. Of course, foxes are nocturnal animals. Not being nocturnal animals ourselves, we decided to lock her up for the night in the bathroom. But this was easier said than done.

All that day, going in or coming out the dining room, we closed the door behind us with panicky speed, afraid that the nimble fox would slip out into the hall and then to the other room. We thought it was quite enough to have one room reeking of the zoo.

But Alice was bent upon spreading to the entire territory of the flat and attempted this again and again with truly foxy cunning, persistence and resourcefulness.

However, when she saw that the door leading out of the dining room was open, she simply refused to go out.

I tied a piece of meat to a string and, playing with Alice as with a kitten, tried to lure her out into the hall. Alice did run out into the hall, but as soon as somebody tried to shut the door of the dining room she easily beat him to it and again became uncatchable. Gay and highly pleased, her slanting "fashionable" eyes sparkling mischievously and her mouth open in a grin, she was obviously making fun of us.

So we "had fun" with Alice until two in the morning. The complex contraption, the result of collective engineering effort, which consisted of a rope, one end of which was in Alyona's hand and the other tied to the door-handle, did not help either. Alice still managed to slip in before Alyona had time to pull the door shut.

But at last the trap worked. Possibly Alice had simply got tired of the game. At any rate she was installed in the bathroom.

Excited by the adventure, I could not fall asleep and took a sleeping pill.

I was just dozing off when there came a terrific crash.

I jumped up and ran into the bathroom. What I saw was both unexpected and disconcerting. Standing on her hind legs in the wash-bowl, Alice was sweeping everything off the glass shelf with her forepaws—a glass with tooth-brushes, a box of tooth-powder, soap, shampoo, eau-de-Cologne, jars of cream. All this was dropping into the wash-bowl or on the floor, breaking to bits, pouring into puddles or scattering over the floor.

Unhurriedly, the fox turned her face towards me. Her muzzle was smeared with tooth-powder. Her mouth was again open in a wide grin.

I cleaned up the mess, removed from the bathroom everything that could be moved, took two more pills and fell asleep happy in the knowledge that there was not an object left in the bathroom with which Alice could make any kind of noise.

Alas, both my happiness and my sleep were short-lived. I had underestimated a fox's ingenuity.

A strange scraping noise awakened me. I rose cursing the fox and discovered her sliding down the bath very much like children slide down an ice-hill. This particular "child" was using its claws (probably to brake the descent) and hence the scraping noise that awakened me.

It was clear that Alice could go on "tobogganing" till morning—when *her* night-time came. Or she would invent some other amusement...



Two days after Alice came to live with us I noticed that she was unwell. She scorned her mattress (too hot!) and lay on her side on cool tiles, groaning softly. Her breathing was feverish and her nose dry and hot.

I took her to the vet. At once she became the centre of attention. Even the splendid marble-coloured Great Dane lost all its admirers.

But Alice was indifferent to her spectacular success. She was feeling very bad indeed. We were allowed to jump the queue, and as soon as a tear-stained old woman came out of the surgery carrying her alcoholic cat who had nearly choked on a cork from a flask with Valerian drops, I went in with Alice in my arms.

The first thing they did to the trembling patient was to push a thermometer under her tail. Her temperature was 44.5°C, which is a lot even for animals, whose body temperature is higher than people's.

Then the vet sounded Alice thoroughly and announced that she had membranous pneumonia.

Alice must have caught cold at the market, sitting for a long time on the snow without movement and swallowing the frosty air with a mouth open wide in her agitation.

"She's very ill," said the vet. But an injection may send a wild animal into shock. Let's try giving her pills. What's her name?"

"Alice."

"And family name?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your family name?" the vet said impatiently.

I gave my name, and the vet wrote out a prescription. On the way home I dropped at a chemist's and, unfolding the prescription, saw: "For Alice Drunina, a vixen."

The next problem was how to make Alice Drunina swallow the



bitter pills. Trying to outsmart a fox three times a day was quite a task!

I made a cut in a piece of raw liver and stuffed in a pill. It worked the first time—Alice swallowed the liver and medicine together. But after swallowing it she looked puzzled and displeased: “What was that nasty stuff inside?”

The second time Alice ate the liver, but left the pill be.

The third time she refused to eat altogether.

Again she was lying on her side, groaning softly, like a quiet unspoilt child, her once fluffy tail held between the legs.

It was clear that no force on earth could make Alice swallow pills, and without medicine she was sure to die. Again I took her to the vet.

“Well,” he said, “there’s nothing for it. Let’s risk an injection.”

The nurse pulled out Alice’s hind leg, the doctor took a syringe with a thick needle... I held my breath: would there be shock? After all Alice was a wild animal. But all passed well.

She began to improve. However, she had to have three injections a day, and I simply had not the time to take her all the way to the vet three times a day. And then my husband, who had never held a syringe in his hand, took a heroic decision: he said he would himself give Alice the injections.

There I sat, holding the wary and suspicious Alice in my lap. Alexei filled the syringe, gently pulled back the X-shaped hind leg, smeared it with iodine and pushed in the needle resolutely. Alice shuddered and tried to see who had “bitten” her treacherously from behind. But the piston did not yield to pressure—the needle must have hit an obstruction. The as yet inept medic scowled and pulled it out. Again he set the leg in position. And at that moment I discovered that my right hand was in Alice’s mouth! Alexei made another jab. I shut my eyes, remembering the chain Alice had gnawed through. Why shouldn’t she take a snap at her tormentors? How could she know that we were hurting her for her own good?

But some instinct must have told her exactly that. Or perhaps she had infinite trust in me. At any rate she just clenched her teeth slightly when Alexei injected the medicine.

Now she began to get better by leaps and bounds. There were many signs of recovery, but the most convincing one was that she was back at her devilry. The first piece of mischief reassured us completely.

It took Alice a very short time to become transformed from a miserable little beast shivering from fear and cold at the Bird Market into the idol of our household, worshipped by our entire family.

We vied with one another to win her affection, and I was inordinately proud to be her obvious favourite.

I was the only person she allowed to pick her up, but even then, the first few seconds she trembled and flattened her ears, as the instinct of a wild animal fought with her feeling of attachment to a human being.

I was the only one who dared offer Alice food from my hand — she always took the titbits very gently and I had no fear for my fingers.

Once Alexei decided he would try to hand-feed Alice too, and offered her a piece of liver. She deigned to accept the offering, placed it on the floor and followed with a lightning-like lunge, symbolic, it is true, but very explicit—don't you try bribing me, take care of your fingers. After that she started eating the liver with dignity.

As for my daughter, Alice terrorized her, there is no other word for it. She went for her legs, aiming for a bite. Armed with a besom, Alyona moved about the flat in huge, funny leaps, often yelling to me for help.

What had Alyona done to displease Alice and earn her dislike? Who can tell? Perhaps some girl had been cruel to her, and Alyona looked like her—tall, and shaggy-headed.



Or perhaps Alice simply resented Alyona's loud voice and jerky movements? Who can tell?

I myself had learnt to move and speak with extreme care. My friends joked that since Alice had come to live with us I no longer walked but glided, no longer gesticulated but made passes with my hands, no longer talked but cooed...

Some of them asked me why I had chosen to keep a wild and not a domestic animal. After all, it caused me no end of trouble!

I just shrugged in reply. Why? Because it filled my life with gladness. It gave me joy to see ever more threads of understanding and trust stretch between us, as my love won over a disobedient, distrustful creature.

I was happy in the knowledge that when I came home, the mere sound of the banging lift door would make Alice twitch her ears, give a thin cricket-like squeak and rush to the door like a dog. To be sure, when I did enter, she pretended that she had wandered into the hall on her own business and not to fawn on me. She was a proud animal, that little vixen!

But that was what I treasured most in her, this pride, this restraint, this sense of independence. It made every sign of attachment all the more precious.

What joy welled up in me when the wild thing suddenly leaped into my lap as I sat hunched on the sofa of an evening, tired and displeased with myself, harassed by the unending stream of our human concerns.

As for mischief—do mothers love their children less for getting into mischief, even if they sometimes drive them to distraction?

Generally there was much of the monkey in Alice's character. She just could not resist the urge to wreak havoc—tear up, break, gnaw things. Therefore in our absence and at night she was confined to her "personal quarters"—the bathroom and the hall.



But she never accepted this arrangement and time and again scratched and gnawed holes under the doors of the rooms. One morning we were horrified to discover half of the parquet in the hall dismantled, board by board.

When we were at home, Alice was invited in, or broke in if not specially invited. The trouble was that she invariably sought out the least accessible corner of the room and made herself a "home" there, with all it entailed.

Occasionally Alice allowed me the unheard-of liberty of pulling her from under a cupboard by her gorgeous tail. She coughed threateningly, snarled and snapped at me, but she never actually bit me for this outrage.

But what were we to do if she wriggled her way inside the sofa and made herself a burrow among the springs? In the beginning we resorted to the help of Uncle Vacuum Cleaner, as we reverently titled our saviour. At the first notes of its whining voice Alice would dart out from inside the sofa, her eyes popping, race into the bathroom and lie down on her mattress. But after a while she got used to the vacuum cleaner, lost her fear of it and even started coughing fiercely at it. Once she even tried to bite it.

She also had another nice hobby—gnawing through the telephone wiring.

But what distressed us most of all was the pungent stench of a zoo which pervaded the flat and even the staircase.

When I entered a bus or an underground train, people started sniffing the air—all our clothes smelt of Alice. I overheard a comment in the underground made by some poisonous old crone: "Stinks like a goat, she does, this fine lady with painted eyes."

There was no getting rid of the stench—it was quite incredibly resistant to all deodorants.

In those days I spent most of my time crawling about on my knees with a rag in my hand. The freshly scrubbed spot





I drenched with a mouth wash which I bought in staggering quantities from our local chemist's.

A friend of mine brought me a priceless gift from India—sticks of sandalwood. We called it “antifoxin”. Whenever we expected guests, I would burn one or two of those aromatic sticks. As they smouldered, a very pleasant heady smoke drifted through the rooms, filling them with a smell of mysterious India, temples ... and Alice. No “antifoxin” was a hundred per cent Alice-proof.

Luckily, the arrival of spring postponed the problem. We rented a house in the country from a certain Granny Masha and moved in with our entire menagery—Alice, Dossy and Pussy. Alice was installed in a dog kennel—quite a luxurious apartment—with spacious grounds surrounded by netting.

On the next day after we moved in I was amazed to see Dossy having a thrilling game with Alice inside her pen. They tussled like a couple of playful puppies. So much for the dog's “inborn hatred” for the fox!

I must say that Dossy was the most good-natured and easy-going creature I had ever met in my life. He tried to make friends with everybody at our country home, even with hedgehogs who paid us nocturnal visits from the wood. True, these overtures of his invariably ended in a bloodied nose and crushed hopes, but he never quite despaired that the next prickly snorting ball would see his beautiful soul...

But how had Dossy got into the pen? Could he have cleared a two-metre high fence?

Well, I'd wait and see how he got out.

It was done very simply—he climbed the fence like a cat, catching at the netting with his claws. Not that it was a very graceful sight, but at least I saw with my own eyes the proverbial “dog on a fence”.

Now Dossy could pay visits to his girl-friend any time of day

or night. Their meetings usually followed the same pattern. At the sight of Dossy Alice began dashing about the pen, unable to contain her feelings. This went on until Dossy flopped down on the ground in Alice's own domain and immediately started a chase after the fox inspired by the ambitious dream of catching her by the tail. The pursuer and the pursued reached a great pitch of excitement. Sometimes Alice changed course so abruptly that Dossy had no time to brake and crashed into the fence at full speed.

Sometimes Pussy came, attracted by the noise of the scuffle. She would perch on one of the pen's four posts and loom there like a sentry on a tower, her big yellow eyes fixed on the "combatants". She was obviously on Alice's side and would become terribly upset when she imagined that the fox was going to end up in the jaws of the blood-thirsty dog. In those moments she arched her back to the utmost, her fur stood on end and she yowled on the highest note, obviously preparing to swoop down on Dossy. On many an occasion I barely managed to snatch her off her perch in time.

Alice and Dossy ate from the same bowl. She, being the mistress of the house, was always offered the first choice. Dossy would stand aside politely, licking his chops and waiting patiently till his girl-friend had had enough. But the girl-friend was greedy, and the thought that she would never manage to eat it all made her frantic. She hurried, choked, swallowed large chunks without chewing and finally, feeling that she had no room for any more food, she'd snatch a large piece of meat out of the bowl and start dashing about holding it in her teeth. Never mind the friendship, she seemed to say, one has to take care of Number One.

She would eventually bury her treasure, then get into a panic, dig it out and start dashing about again.

Dossy watched her capers imperturbably, and later, as imperturbably, dug out and ate up her stores.



The fox and the dog were inseparable, and we were happy that she had such a devoted friend. But once I heard a plaintive puppy-like squealing. Who was it complaining?

I discovered it was Alice, abandoned by Dossy at the height of their game. She was trying to scabble up the netting after her departing playmate, but kept falling, scrambling up again, and falling again...

More and more often I heard the plaintive squeals. Having learnt to get over Alice's netting, Dossy used the newly acquired skill to get over the fence surrounding our garden. There was no keeping him at home, with all the willing lady-dogs roaming the village, followed by their admirers. Thunderous polyphonic barking burst out every so often as yet another dog fight flared up.

Sometime Dossy was absent for three days at a run, and he came back looking scrawny, miserable and covered with bites.

On his return Dossy usually crawled on his belly all the way from the fence to the kennel. For several days he would stay at home, licking his wounds, both bodily and spiritual. Then he would be off again.

Alice became limp and glum, quite unlike her former cheerful self.

Then one day, upon returning from yet another jaunt, Dossy reappeared in Alice's pen. We expected her to go wild with joy, but she cut him cold. In vain were his attempts to start a jolly chase. Alice gave him an indifferent stare, yawned widely, turned and trotted into her house.

Early morning. I am bringing Alice a bowl of food.

As soon as she sees me, Alice begins to dash back and forth about the pen—she is hungry and eager for her breakfast. When I enter the pen, she jumps round me like a playful dog and tugs at the skirts of my dress in her impatience.

Then I set about cleaning the pen, and Alice does her merry



best to get in the way—snapping at the rake, jumping at my feet as a fox does when hunting mice.

If the weather is good, I bring inside the pen a light collapsible table, its legs bearing the marks of Alice's teeth, and a collapsible chair similarly marked and sit down to work.

I am eager to use every hour, every minute for contact with Alice, for getting closer to her.

I like working in the pen. Strangely, its walls of netting seem to protect me from the daily fuss and worry.

The fox demands attention and makes fierce attacks now on the table legs, now on my own, but this does not distract me in the least. I play with her absent-mindedly, my inner concentration intact. And all the time I feel happy that there is a creature in the world whom it is within my power to protect from all ills.

(That was what I believed then. As though it is possible to protect anybody from that implacable mixture of law and chance that we used to call fate!)

Sometimes I took Alice for a walk in the wood. I had to carry her in my arms, like a baby, for she never learnt to walk on a leash. Alice adored those walks. She was as inquisitive as a monkey, and the wood was chock-full of interesting things.

And once an incident happened, which engendered in me an enormous respect for Alice.

We went for our walk as usual. It was a serene and slightly sad noon of Indian summer. The summer holiday-makers had all left, and the wood rested from their blaring transistors. I walked along a cutting that was as straight as an arrow. The birch trunks were translucent, the sun was bright, the silence deafening. Suddenly I heard a woman's scream. I looked round and saw a white shaggy dog, the size of a calf, galloping silently after us along the cutting. It was Pirate, a fierce dog of the South-Russian sheep-dog breed.





Not only the local boys gave a wide berth to the garden guarded by Pirate, but even grown-ups, who had no designs on other people's apples, walked warily along the fence behind which dashed that huge fleecy beast with his yellow fangs bared ferociously.

And now this monster was making straight for us. A stout lady in high-heeled shoes was running after it, quite a way behind, shouting and waving a leash. The dog ignored her, maintaining his sinister silence.

The distance between us was dwindling catastrophically. There was no point in running—it was much more dangerous, in fact, than staying put and trying to divert Pirate with conversation until his mistress arrived with the leash. And the main thing was not to show your fear.

But there was still enough time for Alice to make her get-away. I was not going to make a present of her to Pirate. I had to set her free at once—even if I were never to see her again...

I lowered Alice to the ground. She slipped into the bushes—and you could go whistling for her!

The dog either did not notice her flight or decided that I was a more worthwhile quarry: he continued to run towards me, silently, without barking. That was the most terrifying thing about his attack.

I pressed my back to a thick birch-tree. No more than two meters now divided me from the dog. "Pirate, doggie," I cooed in a disgustingly sweet, ingratiating tone, "please don't bite me..."

The dog stopped in his tracks. Encouraged by his puzzlement, I went on in a steadier voice: "You're such a handsome, clever, kind dog..."

At that moment I saw Pirate tense up for a jump: he aimed at my throat. The first leap was not high enough. I don't know how I managed to dodge the second.

I awaited a third attack with terror, watching the progress

of Pirate's frantic mistress from the corner of my eye. Fear had given her a spurt of energy, but she could not possibly make it. Anyway, would the plump lady be able to control her fierce dog?

Suddenly Pirate, who had squatted in preparation for a third leap, broke into a howl. I could not believe my eyes—my small brave fox had sunk her teeth into his hind leg like a bulldog...

Pirate made a lightning-fast lunge, but his fangs snapped on air. Alice was already racing away, her fluffy tail held high. When she did that her length was reduced by half, and so it was twice as hard to get hold of her. Pirate forgot all about me and dashed in hot pursuit.

I breathed a sigh of relief and made a bee-line for home. I had no doubt that Alice would get away from the big dog, but would she come home?

When I ran up to the pen I saw Alice lying calmly on the roof of her house. Only her heaving sides betrayed that she had been running. Otherwise her entire aspect — the lazy sprawling pose, the half-closed eyes—seemed to say: "What are you on about? I merely acted as any self-respecting fox would. In our steppes and deserts we don't abandon our friends in trouble."

October had come, rains were drumming on the roof but we were still living in the country, unable to decide what to do with Alice. One thing was clear to us—it was impossible to keep her in a city apartment. Finally life itself solved our problem.

At the end of October we had to leave on business, and with great misgiving entrusted our animals to the mercies of our landlady—Granny Masha. The old woman detested Alice, unable to understand how could anyone bother about a "useless" animal.

When I came back three weeks later I found Alice's house empty. I rushed to Granny Masha. She greeted me with a joyful monologue: "She ran away, that fox. Two days after you left. I came out with the bowl in the morning, the way you told me, and thought



she'd jump out and start coughing at me. That's what she gave me by way of thanks! But she did not jump out, and I saw the door was open a chink. I must've forgotten to bolt it the night before, and that fox is a crafty beast... Now, what're you crying for? It's a good thing she ran off and set you free. The trouble you had with her!"

More than twenty days had gone since Alice's escape. I was sure that if she had not met with misadventure she'd have come back more than once. But there was nobody but Granny Masha in the house...

Most probably, the first day of freedom was also Alice's last day. Neither dogs nor hunters were likely to spare her, too trusting for the world into which she had suddenly been plunged. Anyway, she had no notion how to procure food...

Without much hope, I left a piece of meat on the roof of her house. It was still there in the morning.

The next morning it was gone, but there were distinct tracks of a cat in the mud beside the fox house.

We went back to town.

Just in case, I begged Granny Masha to leave pieces of food for Alice on the roof of her house. But if the old woman did fulfil my request, it could only have benefited some stray cat abandoned by the summer residents.

I accepted the first offer of a business trip, and upon returning I did not leave town all winter. It was only in March that I went to visit Granny Masha.

It was a radiant spring day. My memories had lost some of their poignancy. All memories are erased by Time in the end... Only I took care never to come near the pen.

That night I dreamed of Alice. I was awakened by her voice, that cricket-like chirring that expressed her joyful surprise.

I switched on the light, read a while, then fell asleep again. And in the morning I saw a string of tracks running across the snow to

the window where my bed stood. My heart missed a beat. The five-fingered tracks looked remarkably like Alice's.

Was the little fox alive? Had some vague recollections brought her to Granny Masha's house exactly at the time I was spending the night there?

But perhaps some other animal had left the tracks? After all the wood was next door. Actually, I preferred this version. It was awful to imagine a creature doomed to eternal loneliness wandering nearby, a creature wanted by nobody but me and forever lost to me, a creature I was responsible for because I had befriended it and had not been able to protect it.

Alice... She came from no one knows where and went no one knows where. And I shall never know who left those tracks in the soggy snow on that night in March...







